

The future of rural bus services in the UK

Darren Shirley investigates why rural bus usage has been waning and how we can ensure the future of these essential services.



Rural bus services have been in decline for many years. Although usage had a boost from the introduction of free concessionary travel for older and disabled people, the overall trend is downward. Whilst reductions in support have accentuated the demise of bus services, it is likely that this would have come about anyway at some point in the future as usage dwindled further. Many people have abandoned buses, as services are unattractive due to circuitous routes and infrequent timetables, coupled with the lack of early morning and evening provision.

Rural areas account for 85% of land in England and 18% of the population. Low population density makes practical and affordable public transport difficult to provide in these areas. The car is dominant in rural areas and is seen as the only option even for households that cannot really afford to own a car, or certainly a second car. Therefore, buses are used by a small proportion of rural dwellers: those who have no other option (older and younger people) and those who, because they have free travel, choose to use it. Rural areas, though, have significantly lower rates of bus use compared to urban areas. However, buses remain an important part of rural life. Over a quarter of all bus passenger journeys in England outside of London are in predominantly rural areas or towns with rural hinterlands.

The problems of rural bus services have been recognised for many years. The sparse population and limited demand make it difficult to provide and sustain, particularly using conventional fixed route bus services. However, this has been the model that has worked as a reasonable compromise, with the ability to be propped up through financial support and coordination with school transport requirements. Furthermore, existing users have tended to show a preference for fixed route services, even if they are quite infrequent. However, again, this is not to say that is not the best solution. As most current users are older people, public consultations show a desire to prioritise Monday–Friday daytime services for shopping, personal business and access to medical appointments, rather than services that will provide access to employment or leisure purposes. The danger of trying to meet current needs is that we perpetuate the sort of provision that is irrelevant to the needs of people in the future.

The spiral of decline in rural public transport has been exacerbated by pressures on local government finances in recent years resulting in reductions in support for bus services. Between 2011/12 and 2016/17, rural bus mileage fell by over 6%. Over the last 10 years, increases in average bus operating costs have outstripped changes in average revenue, leading to reduced margins and contributing to the withdrawal of both commercial and supported services.

Over the years, government has expressed the need to support rural public transport and various funding streams have been introduced. These facilitated and encouraged the development of new community transport services and enabled the principles of demand responsive services to be established. In some areas these kick-started entirely new approaches to the provision of rural public transport, such as the InterConnect network and CallConnect demand responsive services in Lincolnshire, which are well established and continue to flourish.

Since 2009, rural public transport has been under pressure as public funding has reduced and many local authorities have cut support for bus services. However, to mitigate these impacts, other short-term initiatives have occurred, including the Department for Transport's Minibus Fund and Total Transport pilot funding. The latter explored how taking an integrated approach to the provision of all passenger transport services might lead to efficiencies and help sustain rural transport services.



Rural areas have significantly lower rates of bus use compared to urban areas

Developments in technology also offer opportunities for new types of transport service.

Today, a patchwork of different forms and types of public transport exist across rural areas, resulting from many different factors. There is no sense of network – services are run by different operators with little or no co-ordination between them and a lack of integrated ticketing. However, there are needs to be met in rural areas and significant sums of public money are spent on providing transport in those areas, such as for school and patient transport services.

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There will continue to be a need for rural public transport. However, it is time for a more comprehensive, consistent and concerted approach to be taken based on a planned network wide concept, as found in other European countries. This can be built on some of the principles that we know can work:

- Framework of inter-urban bus and local rail services
- Demand responsive provision in areas of low demand
- Involvement of communities in the planning and development of transport services

Buses remain an important part of rural life



- • Harnessing community-based transport, taxis and private hire vehicles as part of the public transport network
- Using integrated (Total Transport) approaches to achieve efficient provision
- Using technology to support information provision, ticketing and on-demand service provision

Based on these principles, there is an opportunity to rethink the provision of rural public transport. However, this requires decision-makers to recognise the importance of such transport and to establish the principle that all rural dwellers should have the opportunity of accessing reasonable public transport services. With such support in place, it will be possible to take a fresh approach, based on the formation of Total Transport areas within which single or combined transport authorities provide leadership in the planning, design, funding and provision of rural transport networks, working in partnership with other interested bodies, communities and operators.

It is vital that rural areas are not abandoned and left to their own devices. It is the most vulnerable individuals in those communities who will suffer and there will be risks of having to deal with other problems, such as the impacts of social isolation on people's health and wellbeing. There will continue to be travel needs to be met, particularly amongst older and younger people without access to a car.

Addressing the needs of rural areas cannot wait for the outcome of decisions around franchising in urban and mayoral areas to be resolved. It may be necessary to press forward with something different in rural areas where it is possible to develop something that has lower risks and can be achieved on a voluntary partnership basis.

Rural public transport needs to be properly planned; it cannot be left to the

vagaries of the market whereby rural communities are only served by chance. As a precursor to change, it will be important for good rural transport to be seen as a necessity by decision-makers and politicians at all levels, such that its wider social, economic and environmental value is recognised. This will provide the necessary support for regulatory and organisational change, as well as securing ongoing funding.

Undoubtedly, rural public transport is in crisis. Bus cuts and shrinking transport networks are making it harder and harder for people to get to work or school, to visit friends and family, or access shops and services, as well as putting extra pressure on our congested roads. Things need to change. The Government must realise the importance of rural transport and do more to help communities and local authorities provide a public transport network that supports rural economies and improves the health and wellbeing of the people who live there.

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